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ABSTRACT

This paper is a personal account of the use of the focused interview technique to collect data on the factors that facilitated and inhibited the research productivity of faculty members in vocational education. A brief literature review is followed by an explanation of how the researcher was urged to abandon her original intention of interviewing a narrow sample of respondents and instead interview the most diverse sample of researchers possible. The paper describes next the procedures followed, problems encountered, and insights gained during the following stages of the study: planning the project to meet specific objectives, selecting and contacting organizations or respondents, constructing the interview guide, conducting the interviews, and recording and analyzing the responses and observations. After reviewing problems and successes while conducting the interviews, the paper concludes that the interview is a useful and workable research method. (MN)

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The Personal Interview as a Data Collection Technique

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Review of the Literature

Like the questionnaire, the interview can vary from a highly structured event to a very unstructured conversation. An example of a highly structured interview is a telephone or person on the street interview, where time and focus are of the essence. This type of interview is likely to be of a relatively short duration and would be used when the questions are fixed, and one is seeking response from as diverse a group as possible.

Somewhere in between is the focussed interview, where "...the wording of the questions is not strictly specified, but the interview is nevertheless focussed since the information that is sought is in an area experienced by the respondent" (Adams and Schaneveldt, 1985, p.216). This is the kind of interview method that I have used in investigating the development of vocational education faculty as researchers (Kelly, 1982) and one that I will discuss later in this paper.

At the other end of the interview continuum is the nondirective or open interview. This type of interview, popularized by Carl Rogers, is used to provide a framework for interaction that is seen as a safe setting, one in which the respondent sets the mood, tone and pace of the interview. Such unstructured interview methods are used when the subject is potentially quite wide ranging, as in Margaret Mead's work with native Samoans.

There are a number of advantages to the interview method. Adams and Schvaneveldt (1985) note that there are at least seven major advantages to the interview as a research method. In addition, I have identified four

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advantages to the specific method that I used, focussed interviewing.

Of the seven general advantages to interviewing as a research method, the first is the advantage that comes from conversing with the respondent personally, that of **increased cooperation**. This generally results in a higher participation rate, since most people find it less of an effort to talk than to write. In addition, once the interview has begun, rapport or trust can be established, which generally leads to more accurate responses.

Second, since the interviewer has established direct contact with the respondent, interviewing has the advantage of allowing the researcher to discuss the interview and respond to any questions the respondent may have.

Third, the quality of the data obtained using this method is likely to be great owing to the advantage that one gains due to the personal nature of the method. A skilled interviewer can "read" people, assess moods and probe, clarify, rephrase or restate questions to the respondent. Thus, interviewers are free to seek information in a different way or more readily seek the truthfulness of the responses.

Moreover, because this method often allows for direct observation of respondents, it allows for flexibility in the way questions are asked and for interviewer response to non-verbal clues, a distinct fourth advantage.

The opportunity an interview provides to generate motivation and rapport is the fifth advantage of the interview method. Since face to face interaction is instrumental in establishing rapport, such interaction often leads to higher levels of motivation on the part of the respondent. Conversely, one then introduces the potential disadvantage of needing to limit conversation or responses due to time or focus constraints.

A related advantage is that one is engaged in the communication process. Since most people seem to enjoy talking, this becomes a real advantage of this

method. As Adams and Schaneveldt (1985) note, essentially, the process of interviewing is the process of communicating "...the interview is very much an artful process, a process in which a sensitive and skilled practitioner can make it easier for respondents to use communication to forward the goals of scientific understanding as well as serve as a very rewarding process through directed conversation" (p.215).

Lastly, once rapport has been established, topics that are perceived as being too sensitive or emotional to put on paper can be talked about to a sensitive interviewer. Thus, the ability to handle sensitive and emotional topics is the seventh advantage of the interview method.

Since I was interested in finding out how vocational education faculty at research oriented universities were developed, and what enabled or inhibited research productivity in their current position, I employed the focussed interview method. Since the focussed interview is designed to provide detailed coverage of a particular topic, four additional advantages, particular to this method, can be identified.

Familiarity with the role of the vocational educator and the "street knowledge" of the professional researcher turned out to be a considerable advantage in using a focussed interview approach to interviewing vocational education researchers. With such background, the interviewer can openly adapt to the respondent, thereby being more likely to learn about the researcher's real behavior, experiences, and attitudes -- to become familiar with her/his feelings and problems.

A second, related advantage is awareness of the full research situation and the larger communication context of the task it involves. Thus, the focussed interview method allows looking at something in depth. Therefore, this method "..can furnish detailed narratives with fully developed readers

and plots thick with conflicting purposes and multiple constraints..." (Goldstein, 1985, p.2), and is aptly suited to the experience of researchers in vocational education.

Moreover, in my case, it afforded me simultaneous contact with the process and products of the professional who must write. By focussing on both the process and products of the research experience, I was able to read and integrate the products of vocational education researchers with the statements they made about how a particular research idea was developed. In fact, I was able to collect a file of models, each of which had some meaning to a particular researcher in my study and that was the result of the living process of research productivity.

Lastly, because I interviewed respondents from a multitude of settings and functions using the focussed interview method, I became acquainted with a wide range of professional activity, thus gaining what I believe to be a balanced perspective on the research experience. Moreover, this particular interview method is a way to keep abreast of innovations in vocational education research.

The Problem

As I alluded to earlier in this paper, the problem that I set out to describe was what facilitated or inhibited the research productivity of faculty members in vocational education. I was particularly interested in seeing whether these factors varied by sex, vocational service area or academic rank. And, like many doctoral students, I had concluded from my courses in research methods that if you wanted to describe something, the most efficient and productive way of doing so was to use a questionnaire.

However, as I was developing the questionnaire, I had the good fortune to have scheduled a conference with Egon Guba, the coauthor of the much quoted

Clark and Guba (1977) productivity studies on the education professoriate. Guba had come to the National Center at Ohio State to give a paper as part of our staff development series.

By that time, I had developed the draft of my questionnaire and in the process of having it reviewed for content validity. I thought that Guba was a good candidate to be on that panel. To my surprise, he suggested that I should rethink the methodology, going instead for a "thick" description of as diverse a group as I could find within the context of the research university and vocational education. He suggested that I attempt to interview people to get a first hand account of those who were looked to as research producers - "get as rich and diverse a sample as you can," I remember him saying.

Logistics

Thus, I reached the point when I needed to rethink the methodology of the study. In so doing, I needed to reacquaint myself with the advantages of this method and the procedures involved in interviewing. I have organized this section of the paper to reflect these six procedures - planning, sampling, the interview guide, interviewing, data collection, and analysis.

1. Planning the project to meet specific objectives

Initially, one needs to be convinced that the interview is the best method for obtaining the desired information in the study. Thus, answers to questions such as "What do I want to know? What will I do with the answers?" should clearly indicate to the researcher and others that interviewing <u>is</u> the appropriate technique for the study. Secondly, the researcher needs to have a clear idea what they will do with the information obtained through the interview.

For me, this initial stage involved much reading, questioning and

reflecting. Moreover, it brought me to the point in 1981 that I was able to intelligently reason and discuss the so-called quantitative / qualitative distinction and defend the methodology, and the purposive sampling technique I employed to obtain the sample.

This purposive sampling technique was chosen to assure that a representative sample of highly regarded vocational education doctoral programs, distributed among service areas that were both sex neutral and traditional for their sex, were included in the study. Thus, I chose to contact faculty in five vocational areas at six research oriented universities to participate in the study.

Once the method has been selected, it is appropriate to survey the published material to see what has been done. At this stage, "the professional literature has a somewhat peculiar relationship to interviewing, being both irrelevant and yet absolutely essential to it - irrelevant because the information gained through the interviewer's experience will never be found written up anywhere, essential because no one can interview from a naive position."(Goldstein, 1980, p. 5)

2.Selecting and contacting organizations or respondents

In any study, selection of respondents is usually a compromise between accuracy and cost. This is particularly true with interviews, as time, travel, and transcription costs can quickly mount up. In my case, 101 potential participants were contacted by mail to determine their willingness to participate in the study. Of the 101 faculty members contacted for participation in the study, 86 agreed to be interviewed, for a response rate of approximately 85%.

I believe that I obtained such a high response rate for two reasons. First, my initial contact letter was one that gave a full statement of the

project's purpose and format, the amount of time allotted to the interview, what, if anything, you are requested from them and the pledge of confidentiality in the reporting of the interview data.

Secondly, once I arrived at the particular university and began interviewing, I made a concerted effort to follow up on those who had not replied to my initial letter, and in some cases, to those who had refused to be interviewed. I found that once I became known around the department, it was relatively easy to use successful interview respondents to introduce and promote participation in the study to others. I suspect such tenacity in an interviewer enhances the participation rate.

On the matter of scheduling interviews, I have two tips:

1)if you ask for 45 minutes, you are likely to get an hour, due to the interest of respondents once engaged in conversation and the way time is usually scheduled.

2) Try to use conventional organizational techniques such as sex or status to schedule like respondents in similar slots as you go from place to place. Upon reflection, I wish that I had systematically slotted interviews with department chairs at the beginning or end of the week, or those from like service areas in close proximity to one another.

3.Constructing the interview guide

Although no interview will proceed exactly as planned, detailed planning will help the interviewer get the information with a minimum of error. The format of the interview should be such that the majority of the questions are open-ended, so as to get a free response. Moreover, they must be organized into a conversational structure to allow the interviewee an opportunity for full, accurate answers. Hopefully, a well organized interview will be stimulating and worthwhile for the respondent, without provoking anger or hostility. Any sensitive or potentially threatening questions should be organized in such a way as to be posed after a line of questioning and its

purpose has been established. By waiting until the respondent's involvement has been encouraged, the interview has reached that one is likely to tell the truth even if it is damaging to oneself.

During the interviews that I conducted, an experience checklist helped develop a frame of reference for the interviewee at the beginning of each interview session and gave me an idea as to where I might start our conversation. In addition, I found that simple warmup questions such as where the respondent was from and how their vocational aspirations were developed seemed to put the respondent at ease and provided an personal dimension to the interview that was helpful.

4. Conducting the interviews

A prerequisite to establishing rapport is a suitable meeting place with sufficient privacy to get detailed, honest answers. In most cases, my interviews were held on campus in the participant's office. Occasionally, scheduling interviews at professional meetings was required, and in these cases, this meant that I had to meet with people in restaurants, lobbies, and hotel rooms where (I suspect) people felt less comfortable than they might have felt in their own offices. However, with some sensitivity to possible intrusions or distractions, even a public place can be suitable. In my case, it served as another way of increasing the participation rate.

The opening of the discussion should be one that inspires confidence and interest. It is appropriate to briefly introduce oneself, and follow this by forecasting the purpose, method, and topic of the interview.

Motivating the respondent to become involved is the next step, for if stimulated by the discussion, the interviewee tends to overcome their initial reserve or anxiety and begin to voluntarily offer comments and suggestions. My topic seemed to have been a natural to motivate discussion, for every

faculty member involved in research seems to have some opinion or experience to share. Many people told me during the interview that they hadn't planned on telling me what they really thought inhibited research productivity, but once they got talking, it seemed to roll right out.

No one interview method will work with everyone, so an interviewer needs to be sensitive to each personality, and adapt his/her style to suit the individual. I have to admit that this is where I believe that I had the greatest problem in my study, for I found that interviewing such well known vocational educators sometimes left me at a loss for words, to say nothing of interview technique.

However, where there was good rapport, it allowed me to probe for answers and seek corroborating evidence on complex issues, either between or among respondents in the same field or within the same department.

One method that helped me achieve this corroboration was the method of data triangulation used in the study. In my study, both quantitative (such as counts of publications reported on vitae) and qualitative (personal interview and experience checklist) methods were used. Guba (1981) states that the use of multiple methods and triangulation of observations can add to the rigor of a study. While the context in which Guba refers to data triangulation is primarily qualitative, I believe that this added tremendously to my study, one that was completed at a time when the interview as "a way of knowing" seemed to be under close scrutiny.

5. Recording and analyzing the responses and observations.

The method I used to record my data was to audio tape each interview and take copious notes during the session. Of course, one needs to obtain permission to tape record prior to the interview. According to Freeman (1980)

sometimes reaction of subjects to tape recorder is a problem. However, being somewhat of an audiophile, I had used this study as an excuse to invest in a Sony Walkman style of tape recorder when they were just starting to appear on the market. This turned out to be quite an advantage in obtaining permission to record, since it was an interesting novelty to most respondents and was quite unobtrusive.

Here are some other tips on recording:

1) Quality 90 minute tapes are worth the investment for two reasons: they come in hard plastic protective cases and hold up much better in the long run and there is distinct psychological value in not having to stop to turn the tape over during the interview. In my case, when the tape ejected after 45 minutes, I was usually at a point in the interview where I could wrap it up or ask for more time. In addition, any space you might have on the second side can be used for another interview or (where there is minimum space), you can record your own comments after the interview or during analysis.

2) Always carry extra batteries and tapes in case either fails and protect your equipment from temperature excesses. I had one interview that could not be recorded due to simultaneous tape and battery failure and two others that were delayed somewhat due the excessively cold temperatures that morning.

Thieman (1980) encapsulates the challenge of recording and guiding the interview in the following manner: "The relationship between the interviewer and the subject is at times very intensive. During these moments the interviewer has to face the difficult demands of being able to concentrate simultaneously on having an accurate overlapping control of the situation and retaining a deep involvement in the ongoing process of mutual understanding" (p. 16). Thieman goes on to suggest that during the interview, one should give full concentration to the dialectical process. During the analysis, the researcher's responsibility is to give a proper analysis of the text given. Thus, the interviewer would have to analyze herself/himself as one of the parts in the written dialogue.

One way to incorporate the dialectical process into the interview is to use what Patton (1980) terms a successive focusing method. In the case of my

study, this means that the interviews were conducted in clusters of two institutions at a time (33% of the sample), with analysis of interview transcripts and categorization of the data into theme areas completed at three separate times. As subsequent interviews were conducted, interview questions were restated or additional questions were added to the interview. As categories developed, they were verified by a second person off-site and presented to subsequent respondents for confirmation checks.

So far as the analysis procedure is concerned, this is where the major difference between qualitative and quantitative procedures seems to end. While those who have quantitative data to code and process using the computer, interview data is "... an unweildy mass of bits and pieces -- overlapping, incomplete and often unclassifiable "(Goldstein, 1980, p.9). Therefore, it makes good sense to acknowledge that the interviewer is part of the instrumentation and must be constantly "fine tuned." Thieman emphasizes that "... we must make use of our capability as human beings to respond to and understand other human beings i.e. the respondent in our interviews. In our talks, the situation, with its expectations and fulfillments, constantly alters and this must be taken into the dialogue " (Thieman, 1980,p.6).

In my case, the interview transcripts of the resulting group of high and low producers were subjected to content analysis. Following the method outlined by Berelson (1954), two major units of analysis were used: words and themes. Therefore, when specific words were used repeatedly in interviews, such as inhibitor or enabler to research, they were recorded and categorized accordingly. Similarly, when like propositions or themes emerged -- i.e., "research ambience" or "research ethos," they were grouped together.

The results were reported using the inductive analysis procedure describe by Patton (1981) as logical analysis. This means that the investigator is

looking for emergent patterns in the data. As Guba (1981) views it, there should be internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. Internal homogeneity refers to the extent that the data hang together or dovetail in a meaningful way. External heterogeneity refers to the degree to which differences among categories are bold and clear.

Problems and Successes

Holcolm talks about the pitfalls of the interview as follows: "The moment you turn off your tape recorder, say goodbye and leave the interview, it will become immediately clear to you what perfect question you should have asked to tie the whole thing together ... but didn't" (in Patton, 1980, p.295). Therefore, I feel that I should discuss the pitfalls of interviewing prior to concluding.

As I see it, there are three major pitfalls to interviewing - interviewer anticipation, inexperience, and probing too far.

The first, interviewer anticipation, is implied by Holcolm in the above quote. A major problem in interviewing is that the interview situation is much like any other type of communication - it encompasses a good deal more than what can be transcribed from the tape recorder. By that I mean that interviewers continually remark that what they knew had been covered during a talk did not appear in the transcription. Thus, interviewers conclude that it was an assumption they made by the sequencing of comments or the shared meaning, expressed verbally or nonverbally, between respondent and interviewer.

Interviewer inexperience is a related problem. Often, when one reviews transcripts, one notes that the inexperienced interviewer wanted a particular answer so much that s/he took the lead when the trigger word or phrase was uttered. Unless the interviewer realizes this and immediately feeds this

occurrence back to the respondent for discussion, one is left with a shakey foundation upon which to make a research conclusion.

In wanting the individual to express as much as he/she knows about the topic, we occasionally go beyond the point where the subject knows any more. Thus, the last pitfall of interviewing, probing to far, is seen. In interviewing, the ideal model is get the respondent "... to express as much as possible, to add some new facts to the body of knowledge previously known, reflect on the total description, and finally to comment on the whole process" (Thieman 1980, p. 10). When the interviewer goes beyond the point where the respondent is able to contribute, the interview momentum tends to stop, making it difficult for a satisfactory conclusion to be made to the process.

Conclusion

It should be evident that the interview is a useful and workable research method. Moreover, I hope that I have provided the reader with some workable tools in thinking through the interview setting, skill and training of the interviewer, openness and frame of the respondent, the subject under study, and a host of other situational factors that enter into the process of obtaining data via the interview.

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